LIFE
JULY 23, 1965

PART II: FROM J.F.K.'s INNER CIRCLE

A THOUSAND DAYS

The Bay of Pigs—'A Horribly Expensive Lesson'

by ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER JR.

This is the second of a series of articles from A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House, *to be published next fall by Houghton Mifflin. This version of the steps leading to the invasion of Cuba in 1961 is based on Mr. Schlesinger's firsthand experience as Special Assistant to the late President.*

Immediately after the 1960 election John F. Kennedy's concern was with an affirmative program for Latin America rather than just Cuba. He first asked for estimates of the effectiveness of the trade embargo against Cuba and of the possibilities of a rapprochement. Then, on Nov. 18, he learned in the course of a briefing by the Eisenhower administration that Cuban exiles were being trained in Guatemala for possible direct action against the Castro regime.

The Eisenhower decision of March 17, 1960 had two main parts. On the political side, it had directed the CIA to bring together a broad range of Cuban exiles, with *Batistianos* and Communists specifically excluded, into unified political opposition to the Castro regime. On the military side, it had directed the CIA to recruit and train a Cuban force capable of guerrilla action against that regime.

The CIA had engaged in a recruiting drive among Cuban

Continued

refugees in Florida and Central America. It also persuaded President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes of Guatemala to permit the establishment of a secret training camp and air base in the Guatemalan mountains. By midsummer the Cubans began to arrive. It was the rainy season and they had to build their own camp in sticky volcanic mud 5,000 feet above the sea. In their spare time they received training from a Filipino colonel who had organized guerrillas against the Japanese during the Second World War.

The first CIA plan was to form small groups designed to slip into Cuba and establish active centers of resistance. In August 1960, President Eisenhower had approved a budget of $13 million for this project. It was explicitly stated at this point that no U.S. military personnel were to take part in combat operations. But in the meantime the military conception was beginning to change. The CIA people began to doubt whether the guerrilla theory would work. They found it hard to make contact with the Cuban resistance in the Escambray Mountains. Certainly Castro, who knew all the tricks himself, was a master at counter-guerrilla action. Moreover, his control over Cuba was tightening. As the Escambray resistance began to fade out, the CIA had reconsidered its original plan, moving on to a new and drastically different conception: the idea of a direct assault on Castro by landing a force of exiles on the Cuban coast. The Filipino colonel went away; and a new U.S. team came into Guatemala to train the Cubans, now numbering almost 500 men, along conventional lines as a pocket army complete with artillery and air support.

Meanwhile, a new wave of refugees had begun to arrive in Florida, and the CIA operation there had taken on a life of its own. In favoring the "reliable" exiles—those who would take orders—the CIA agents in the field were conceivably endangering the whole project; the men most capable of rallying popular support within Cuba against the Castro regime were bound to be more independent, more principled and more radical than the manageable types whom the intelligence agency preferred for operational reasons. As for the nominal Cuban leadership in the U.S., it was growing uneasily aware that it lacked authority; that, as it accepted its instructions and its cash from the CIA, it lacked dignity; that it did not even know what was going on.

In the camps of Guatemala the Cubans were turning with enthusiasm from the idea of a guerrilla operation to the idea of an amphibious invasion. They genuinely believed that a mass landing on the Cuban beaches might set off a general revolt. The CIA and U.S. Army officers were even more sanguine.

This was the way matters stood when John F. Kennedy learned of the project for the first time from Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell of the CIA in November 1960. A little over a week later the President-elect received from Dulles a detailed briefing on the new military conception—that is, an amphibious invasion rather than a guerrilla operation. Kennedy listened with attention, then told Dulles to carry the work forward. Dulles understood that interest did not mean commitment. All Kennedy wanted at this point was the option of an exile attack on the Castro regime. He did not realize how contingency planning could generate its own momentum and create its own reality.

In the next weeks government floated as in a void. Neither the outgoing nor the incoming administrations wanted to make fundamental decisions, and most matters moved along existing tracks. The hiatus in Washington gave the CIA operatives in the field a free hand. Since the Cuban force in Guatemala was still too small to execute the new CIA plan, recruitment now had the urgent priority. Unmarked planes picked up the refugees at the supposedly deserted Opa-Locka airport in Miami and deposited them a few hours later at the Guatemalan training camp.

The influx of new recruits created problems. Men who had taken part in the Castro revolution had a natural hatred of officers who had served the exiled dictator Fulgencio Batista. In spite of optimistic reports to the CIA in Washington, discontent at the camp increased, and in January it broke out into

Continued

mutiny. In one of the unhappier passages in this whole unhappy story, the CIA operatives arrested a dozen of the ringleaders and held them prisoner under stark conditions deep in the jungle of northern Guatemala.

This episode had scant impact on Washington. If it was ever reported to the new President, it must have been greatly minimized. The impression given at the White House meetings was that members of the Cuban Brigade could not be happier.

The CIA planners in the capital first settled upon the town of Trinidad, on the southern coast of Cuba, 282 miles southeast of Havana, as the point of invasion. Trinidad had the advantages of a harbor, a defensible beachhead, remoteness from Castro's main army and easy access to the protective Escambray Mountains.

On Jan. 22, just two days after the Inauguration, Allen Dulles and General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, exposed the project to leading members of the new Administration, among them Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and Robert Kennedy. Six days later President Kennedy convened his first White House meeting on the plan. He was wary and reserved in his reaction. The CIA was to continue what it had been doing. The ground rule against overt participation was still to prevail.

The Joint Chiefs, after brooding for a week over the CIA's Trinidad plan, pronounced favorably on the chances of initial military success. The JCS evaluation was, however, a peculiar and ambiguous document. At one point it said categorically that ultimate success would depend on either a sizable uprising inside the island or sizable support from outside. Later, without restating these alternative conditions for victory, the document concluded that the existing plan, if executed in time, stood a "fair" chance of ultimate success. There was plainly a logical gap between the statement that the plan would work if one or another condition were fulfilled and the statement that the plan would work anyway.

The pace of events was quickening. Castro, the CIA said, was about to receive jet airplanes from the Soviet Union along with Cuban pilots trained in Czechoslovakia to fly them; after June 1 it would take the United States Marines and Air Force to overthrow Castro. By mid-March the President was confronted with a now-or-never choice.

On March 11 I was summoned to a meeting with President Kennedy in the Cabinet Room. An intimidating group sat around the table—the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, three Joint Chiefs resplendent in uniforms and decorations, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Thomas C. Mann), the chairman of the special Latin American Task Force (Adolf Berle Jr.) and appropriate assistants and various bottle washers. I shrank into a chair at the extreme end of the table and listened in silence.

It fell to Allen Dulles and to Richard M. Bissell Jr. of the CIA to make the main arguments for action. Bissell had conceived and fought through the plan of U-2 flights over the Soviet Union; and though this led to trouble in 1960, it still remained perhaps the greatest intelligence coup since the war. He had committed himself to the Cuban project with equal intensity.

Both Dulles and Bissell were at a disadvantage in having to persuade a skeptical new administration about the virtues of a proposal on which they had worked for a long time and in which their organization had a heavy vested interest. This cast them in the role more of advocates than of analysts, and it led them to accept progressive modifications of the plan so long as the expedition in some form remained; perhaps they unconsciously supposed that once the operation began to unfold, it would not be permitted to fail.

Richard M. Bissell Jr. of the CIA, an originator of the invasion plan, argued persuasively that the exiles' attack would result in popular Cuban uprising.

The determination to keep the scheme alive sprang in part, I believe, from the embarrassments of calling it off. Even if the Cuban Brigade were successfully disbanded, its members would disperse, disappointed and resentful, all over Latin America. They would tell where they had been and what they had been doing, and they would explain how the United States had lost its nerve. The contingency had thus become a reality; having created the brigade as an option, the CIA now presented its use against Cuba as a necessity. Nor did the arguments lack force. Confronted by them, Kennedy tentatively agreed that the simplest thing, after all, might be to let the Cubans go where they yearned to go—to Cuba.

Bissell argued anew the case for the Trinidad plan. Kennedy questioned it as "too spectacular." He did not want a big amphibious invasion in the manner of the Sec-

Continued

ond World War; he wanted a "quiet" landing, preferably at night. And he insisted that the plans be drawn on the basis of *no U.S. military intervention*—a stipulation to which no one at the table made objection.

During the next three days the CIA planners canvassed alternative landing sites, of which the most likely was about 100 miles west of Trinidad in the Zapata area around Cochinos Bay—the Bay of Pigs. The Joint Chiefs, examining these recommendations on March 14, agreed that Zapata seemed the best of the three alternatives, but added softly that they still preferred Trinidad. When we met once more on March 15, Bissell outlined the Zapata plan. Kennedy, listening somberly, suggested some changes, mostly intended to "reduce the noise level"—such as making sure that the invasion ships would be unloaded before dawn. He then authorized the CIA to continue on the assumption that the invasion would occur. But he repeated his decision against U.S. military intervention and added, carefully and categorically, that the expedition must be laid on in a way which would make it possible for him to call it off as late as 24 hours before D-day.

The CIA, acting on the President's instructions, engineered a coerced alliance between the two main Cuban exile organizations headquartered in the U.S. On March 22 an agreement was signed which made Dr. José Miró Cardona, a lawyer and professor who had been Castro's first prime minister, head of the new Cuban Revolutionary Council.

While this reorganization was going on, I learned that my assignment was to help clarify the new political objectives by preparing a White Paper on Cuba. The President told me that *if* the invasion took place (the emphasis was his own), he wanted everyone in the hemisphere to know that its intent was not to bring back the old order in Cuba. "Our objection isn't to the Cuban revolution," he said. "It is to the fact that Castro has turned it over to the Communists."

I buried myself under a mass of papers and came up with a draft in a few days. The paper sought to explain, with documentation, the U.S. attitude toward the Cuban revolution and the Castro regime. The thesis was that the first had been betrayed by the second, and that the result offered "a clear and present danger to the authentic and autonomous revolution of the Americas." It endorsed the original aims of the Cuban revolution.

There followed my introduction to one of the ordeals of bureaucratic Washington—the process of interdepartmental clearance. Actually, Adolf Berle and Tom Mann in State and Tracy Barnes in the CIA applauded the general tone of the document. But USIA, which Edward R. Murrow had not yet succeeded in shaking loose from the platitudes of the Eisenhower era, found the piece altogether too racy and liberal.

It went to the President over the weekend and we discussed it on the following Tuesday, March 28. He was, as so often, generous in his comment but had a number of specific suggestions, mostly designed to increase the magnanimity of the text. As we finished, I said, "What do you think about this damned invasion?" He said wryly, "I think about it as little as possible." But it was clear, as we talked, that the President had, of course, been thinking about it a good deal.

In his judgment, the critical point—the weak part of the case for going ahead—lay in the theory that the landings would touch off a mass insurrection against the regime. How unpopular was Castro anyway? I mentioned a series written by Joseph Newman for the New York *Herald Tribune*, citing a piece which reported the strength of popular sentiment behind Castro. The President said quickly, "That must have been the fourth piece—I missed it. Could you get it for me?" I sent it over that evening. In a short while he called back to ask that I talk to Newman, an expert on Latin America, and obtain, as hypothetically as possible, his estimate about Cuban responses to an invasion.

All of us in the White House considered uprisings behind the lines essential to the success of the operation; so too did the Joint Chiefs; and so, we thought, did the CIA. Dulles and Bissell themselves reinforced this impression. They cited requests from contacts in Cuba for arms drops and offered assurances that a specified number of men on the island stood ready to fight when the signal was given. My experience in the OSS during the Second World War left me with a sad skepticism about such messages. Too often the senders inflated their strength, whether out of hope or despair, or because they wanted guns, ammunition and radios to sell on the black market. It appeared only later that the CIA's elaborate National Estimates procedure, which is responsible for assessments of the possible consequences of U.S. policy changes, was never directed to the question of whether an invasion would trigger other uprisings. Robert Amory Jr., the able deputy director for intelligence, was not informed at any point about any aspect of the operation. The men on the State Department's Cuban desk, who received the daily flow of information from the island, were not asked to comment on the feasibility of the venture. The "need to know" standard—*i.e.*, that no one should be told about a classified project unless it becomes operationally necessary—had the idiotic effect of excluding much of the expertise of government at a time when every alert newspaperman knew something was afoot.

The conversation with Joe Newman strengthened my misgivings about the CIA's estimates. Newman said Castro still roused intense enthusiasm and faith, especially among the young and among

Continued

those who had benefited from the social changes of the revolution. Even a sizable middle group, now disillusioned about Castro, would not be likely to respond with enthusiasm to an invasion backed by the United States because we were so thoroughly identified in their minds with the despot Batista. Newman said, "We must understand that, from the viewpoint of many Cubans, including anti-Castro Cubans, we come into the ring with exceedingly dirty hands."

The conferences in the Cabinet Room were now taking place every three or four days. The President, it seemed to me, was growing steadily more skeptical as his hard questioning exposed one problem after another in the plans. Following the meeting on March 29 I noted: "The final decision will have to be made on April 4. I have the impression that the tide is flowing against the project."

Dulles and Bissell now redoubled their efforts at persuasion. Dulles told Kennedy that he felt much more confident about success than he ever had in the case of Guatemala, where a CIA operation had overthrown a leftwing government in 1954. Moreover, if worst came to worst and the invaders were beaten on the beaches, then, Dulles and Bissell said, they could easily "melt away" into the mountains.

I don't think we fully realized that the Escambray Mountains lay 80 miles from the Bay of Pigs, across a hopeless tangle of swamps and jungles.

The Joint Chiefs seemed to be going contentedly along. They met four times after March 15 to review the Bay of Pigs project as it evolved; and while their preference for Trinidad was on the record and they never formally approved the new plan, they at no time opposed it. Robert McNamara accepted the judgment of the Joint Chiefs. Dean Rusk listened inscrutably through the discussions, confining himself to gentle warnings against possible excesses. When Rusk went to a SEATO conference in late March and Chester Bowles as Acting Secretary sat in his place, Bowles was horrified by what he was hearing for the first time. On March 31 he gave Rusk a strong memorandum opposing the invasion. Rusk reassured Bowles, leaving him with the impression that the project was being whittled down into a guerrilla infiltration, and filed the memorandum away. Kennedy never did see it.

In the meantime Senator Fulbright had grown increasingly concerned over the newspaper stories forecasting an invasion. The President was planning to spend the Easter weekend in Palm Beach and, learning that Fulbright also was going to Florida, invited the senator to travel with him on the presidential plane. On March 29 Fulbright wrote a memorandum which he gave Kennedy the next day. He opposed the invasion and urged a policy of containment. It was a brilliant memorandum. Yet the President returned from Palm Beach more militant than when he left. But he did ask Fulbright to attend the climactic meeting on April 4. This meeting was held at the State Department.

The President started asking people around the table what they thought. Fulbright denounced the whole idea. The operation, he said, was wildly out of proportion to the threat. He gave a brave, old-fashioned American speech, honorable, sensible and strong; and he left everyone in the room, except myself and possibly the President, wholly unmoved.

Kennedy continued around the table. McNamara said he favored the operation. Tom Mann said that he would have opposed it at the start, but now that it had gone so far it should be carried through. Adolf Berle wanted the men put into Cuba but did not insist on a major production. Kennedy once again wanted to know what could be done in the way of quiet infiltration by guerrillas as against the beachhead assault. The meeting fell into discussion before the round of the table was completed. Soon we broke up.

As we were leaving the room, the President called me back and asked for my opinion. I said I was against the operation and tried to explain why. Listening, he nodded his head once or twice but said little. The next morning I went to the office at 6:30 and wrote down my views in time to put them on the President's desk before his day began. I had been thinking about little else for weeks and was clear in my mind that the invasion was a terrible idea. My opposition (expressed in this memorandum of April 5 and a second one five days later) was founded on the implausibility of the plan's two political premises: that, if only Cubans took part, the United States could dissociate itself from the consequences; and that, if the beachhead could be held for a few days and enlarged, there would be defections from the militia and uprisings behind the lines. Nor would sending in the Marines solve the problem, because the *Fidelistas* could be counted on to fight to the end—retreating, if necessary, to the Sierra Maestra where the Castro rebellion had begun—and most of the world would cheer them on. More than that, a course of bullying intervention would destroy the new image of the United States and might recklessly expend one of our greatest national assets—John F. Kennedy himself. Nothing had been more depressing in the whole series of meetings than to watch a collection of officials prepare to sacrifice the world's growing faith in the new American President. Dean Rusk was almost alone in recognizing this problem; but his solution was the curious one of suggesting that someone other than the President make the final decision and do so in Kennedy's absence—someone who could be sacrificed if things went wrong.

My memoranda look nice on the record, but they represented, of course, the easy way out. In the months after the Bay of Pigs I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those meetings in the Cabinet room. I can only explain my failure to do more than raise a few timid questions by reporting that one's impulse to blow the whistle on this nonsense was simply undone by the circumstances of the occasion. It is one thing for a special assistant, like myself, to talk frankly in private to a President and another for a college professor, fresh to the government, to interpose his unassisted judgment in open meeting against such august figures as the secretaries of State and Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The President's response to my [illegible] was oblique. He said, "You know, I've reserved the right to stop this thing up to

ContInued

24 hours before the landing. In the meantime, I'm trying to make some sense out of it. We'll just have to see." But he, too, began to become a prisoner of events.

Dick Goodwin, Kennedy's aide, urged me to send Dean Rusk a copy of my memorandum to the President and follow it up by a personal visit. When I set forth my doubts on Saturday, April 8, the Secretary listened quietly and somewhat mournfully. Finally, he said he would try to talk with the President on Monday. He recurred to a suggestion with which he had startled the Joint Chiefs during one of the meetings. This was that the operation fan out from the naval base at Guantánamo with the prospect of retreating to that U.S. base in case of failure. He remarked, "It is interesting to observe the Pentagon people. They are perfectly willing to put the President's head on the block, but they recoil from the idea of doing anything which might risk Guantánamo."

Probably by that Saturday morning the President had already made up his mind. As the decision presented itself to him, he had to choose whether to disband a group of brave and idealistic Cubans, already trained and equipped, who wanted very much to return to Cuba on their own, or to permit them to go ahead. More generally, the decision resulted from the fact that he had been in office only 77 days. He had not had the time or opportunity to test the inherited instrumentalities of government. He could not know which of his advisers were competent and which were not. The massed and caparisoned authority of his senior officials in foreign policy and defense was unanimous for going ahead with the operation. "If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill," Kennedy said to me later, "I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."

One further factor no doubt influenced him: an enormous confidence in his own luck. Everything had broken right for John F. Kennedy since 1956. Everyone around him thought he had the Midas touch and could not lose. Despite himself, even this dispassionate and skeptical man may have been affected by the soaring euphoria of the new day.

Had one senior adviser opposed the adventure, I believe that Kennedy would have canceled it. Not one spoke against it.

On the following Tuesday the Robert Kennedys gave a party to celebrate Ethel's birthday. It was a large, lively, uproarious affair, overrun by guests, skits, children and dogs. In the midst of the gaiety Robert Kennedy drew me aside. He said, "I hear you don't think much of this business." I confirmed it and gave my reasons. Finally he said, "You may be right or you may be wrong, but the President has made his mind up. Don't push it any further."

The President detailed Adolf Berle and Mr. Schlesinger to go to New York to re-emphasize to the Cuban Revolutionary Council that in no case would there be overt U.S. military intervention. The misunderstanding, however, remained; Miró Cardona claimed later that he had been promised 10,000 U.S. troops. Schlesinger thinks Miró's knowledge of English or the translation was sadly at fault and that, in any event, Miró probably heard what he desperately wanted to hear. A Marine colonel visited Guatemala and sent a final evaluation of the Cuban Brigade's capabilities. It was favorable. D-day was set for April 17, and was to be preceded by an air strike from Nicaragua two days ahead. The planes were B-26s, piloted by Cuban exiles.

In New York Adlai Stevenson at the U.N. was getting ready for a long-delayed debate in the General Assembly over a Cuban charge of aggressive intentions on the part of the United States. The President, who had been much concerned about the U.N. aspect of the Cuban operation, wished Stevenson to be fully informed; nothing said at the U.N. should be less than the truth, even if it could not be the full truth. After the Saturday morning, April 15 air strike from Nicaragua, Raúl Roa, the Cuban foreign minister, succeeded in advancing the Cuban item on the agenda, scheduled for the following Monday, to an emergency session of the U.N. Political Committee that afternoon. In Washington, Harlan Cleveland of the Bureau of International Organization Affairs tried to ascertain as quickly as possible the facts about the air strike. His office called the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, which in turn called the CIA. Word promptly and definitely came back that it was the work of defectors from Castro's air force and Cleveland passed this information on to Stevenson. This was a CIA "cover story," and Stevenson read parts of it into the U.N. record.

The President had, meanwhile, gone off to his Virginia retreat at Glen Ora early Saturday afternoon; had he remained in Washington, contrary to custom, the press would have presumed that something was up. At Sunday noon, the last "no-go" point, he authorized the expedition to proceed to the beaches. But in Washington it was evident that the CIA cover story on the air strike was cracking and that Stevenson had been permitted to misinform the U.N. Stevenson was understandably incignant; Rusk was remorseful. In particular, the collapse of the cover story brought the question of a planned second air strike into new focus. Rusk, after his talks with Stevenson, concluded that a second strike would put the United States in an untenable position. McGeorge Bundy agreed, and they called the President at Glen Ora.

It was now late Sunday afternoon. Kennedy took the call in his bedroom. Jacqueline was with him. After hearing Rusk's case, the President directed that the second strike be canceled. It was a long conversation. When it was over, Kennedy sat for a moment

Continued

on the edge of the bed and shook his head, then began to pace the room in evident distress, finally going downstairs. Jackie knew how easily he made decisions. She had never seen him so low.

The stop order arrived in Nicaragua as the pilots were waiting in their cockpits for take-off. Next morning—Monday, April 17—the first frogman on each beach was, in spite of Kennedy's order, an American.

In Washington, Kennedy arrived by helicopter from Glen Ora. An angry diplomatic note came in from Khrushchev, denouncing the invasion. The reports from the beaches were fragmentary and confused; at 9:30 a.m. Castro's air force had sunk the ship carrying the brigade's ammunition reserve for the next 10 days and most of the communications equipment. By early Tuesday it was clear that the invasion was in trouble.

The President asked me to luncheon that day with James Reston of the New York *Times*. In spite of the news, Kennedy was calm and candid. Saying frankly that reports were discouraging, he spoke with detachment about the problems he would now face. "I probably made a mistake in keeping Allen Dulles on," he said. "It's not that Dulles is not a man of great ability. He is. But I have never worked with him, and therefore I can't estimate his meaning when he tells me things. . . . Dulles is a legendary figure, and it's hard to operate with legendary figures." As for the CIA: "We will have to do something. . . . I must have someone there with whom I can be in complete and intimate contact." He added, "I made a mistake in putting Bobby in the Justice Department. He is wasted there. Byron White could do that job perfectly well. Bobby should be in CIA. . . . It's a hell of a way to learn things, but I have learned one thing from this business—that is, that we will have to deal with the CIA. McNamara has dealt with Defense; Rusk has done a lot with State; but no one has dealt with the CIA."

Some people, Kennedy noted, were arguing that failure would cause irreparable harm, that we had no choice now but to commit U.S. forces. Kennedy disagreed. Defeat, he said, would be an incident, not a disaster. But would not U.S. prestige suffer if we let the rebellion flicker out? "What is prestige?" Kennedy asked. "Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power. No doubt we will be kicked in the ass for the next couple of weeks, but that won't affect the main business."

It was a long and grim day. That night the annual congressional reception was held at the White House. The President lingered in the West Wing until the last possible minute, still hopeful for a turn in the news. Then he went somberly back to the mansion to put on white tie and tails. A few moments later, his head high, he entered the East Room and mingled serenely with the guests.

I had gone home dead tired to Georgetown. Around one in the morning the phone rang. It was Mac Bundy. He said, "I am in the President's office, and he would like to have you come down here as soon as possible." When I arrived I found the President, the Vice President, Rusk, McNamara, Lemnitzer and Arleigh Burke, Dick Bissell, along with White House staff members Bundy and Walt Rostow. They were gloomily reading dispatches just received from the beachhead.

In a short while Adolf Berle arrived. The President turned to the problem of the Cuban Revolutionary Council, which was standing by in Miami. "One member is threatening suicide," Kennedy said to Berle. "Others want to be put on the beachhead. All are furious with the CIA. They do not know how dismal things are. You must go down and talk to them." Berle said, "Yes"; then added wryly, "I can think of happier missions." As the meeting broke up around 2 in the morning, Kennedy called me over and said, "You ought to go with Berle." Later that night, when the group had left his office, the President walked alone in the desolate silence of the White House garden.

In Miami Mr. Schlesinger and Mr. Berle found members of the Cuban Revolutionary Council were being held virtually incommunicado. Miró Cardona—he had a son on the beachhead; Tony Varona—a son, two brothers and two nephews; Antonio Maceo—a son; Manuel Ray, Justo Carrillo and Carlos Hevia. They pleaded for direct U.S. intervention. Did not Washington understand that its whole future in Latin America turned on whether it could meet the challenge of Castro in Cuba?

It was past 10 o'clock in the morning, and Adolf Berle and I retired for consultation. We were much moved by the power and bitterness of the council's protests. Our first thought was to get the council members to Nicaragua. But, when we called Washington, we were informed that the operation was substantially over. The only signal from the beach was a wail of SOSs. When we asked about evacuation, we were told that the time had passed even for that. Our hearts sank. I said, "Can't we do something to bring the President into it?" Adolf said, "We must take them to Washington and have the President see them."

Colonel Godfrey McHugh, the President's air aide, met us at the airport and took us immediately to the White House, where we came in by the East Wing to avoid the press. The council members waited in the Cabinet Room, while Berle and I went ahead to see the President. Kennedy, exceptionally drawn and tired, was, as usual, self possessed.

In a few moments the Cubans entered. They sat down on the two couches facing each other in front of the fireplace, with the President in his rocking chair. Commander Tazewell Shepard, the naval aide, gave a report, precise and bleak,

Continued

Approved For Release 2004/11/01 : CIA-RDP88-01350R000200640034-7

on the beachhead. Then Kennedy, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, declared his sorrow over the events of the last 48 hours. The struggle against Communism, he said, had many fronts; leadership in that struggle imposed many responsibilities. The United States had to consider the balance of affairs all around the world. However tragic this episode, no one could doubt our commitment to the eventual freedom of Cuba. The President added that he had himself fought in a war, that he had seen brave men die, that he had lost a brother, and that he shared their grief and their despair.

Miró and other members of the council said a few words. Discussion continued till 6 o'clock. As the Cubans prepared to leave, the President told them, "I want you all to understand that, as soon as you leave the White House, you are all free men—free to go wherever you want, free to say anything you want and free to talk to anyone you want."

I had never seen the President more impressive. In spite of themselves, his visitors were deeply moved. Then he asked me to take the Cubans back to the Kennedy family quarters and await him. There we had tea and sandwiches. After a time Kennedy rejoined us. The talk was about a rescue program for the survivors; Kennedy was prepared to run more risks to take the men off the beach than to put them there.

The impact of the failure shook up the national security machinery. It taught every adviser involved something about the President, the other advisers, his own department and himself. It was a horribly expensive lesson, but it was well learned. In later months the President's father would tell him that, in its perverse way, the Bay of Pigs was not a misfortune but a benefit. I doubt whether the President ever fully believed this. But no one can doubt that failure in Cuba in 1961 contributed to success in Cuba in 1962.

Meanwhile, the routine of Washington life was, as ever, implacable. The prime minister of Greece was visiting the capital that week, and the Kennedys had to go to a dinner at the Greek Embassy. Once again, the President concealed anguish under a mask of courtesy and composure. It was later, when he returned to the White House, that the incomparable self-possession at last faltered. The vision haunted him of the men on the beaches, who had gone off with such splendid hopes, had fought so bravely and now would be shot down like dogs or carried off to Castro's prisons. The only times Jackie had seen him weep were in the hospital at moments of sheer discouragement over his back; tears would fill his eyes and roll down his cheeks. Now, in the bedroom, he put his head into his hands and almost sobbed, and then took her in his arms.

NEXT WEEK: A THOUSAND DAYS, PART 3

FRUSTRATIONS OVER THE STATE DEPARTMENT

Foot-dragging in a tradition-ridden bureaucracy that prompted Kennedy to say: 'The State Department is a bowl of jelly'

Continued

Probably the most heated argument to develop in the wake of the Bay of Pigs concerned the use—or nonuse—of air power to support the invading Cuban exiles. This is Mr. Schlesinger's account of that aspect of the disaster.

The question of air attack had been under heavy debate since January. The State Department had opposed preinvasion strikes as incompatible with the ground rule against showing the American hand. In the department's view, there should be no air activity until the invaders had secured an airstrip of their own in Cuba and their air power could appear to be something they were mounting out of their own resources. The Pentagon, on the other hand, had contended that preinvasion air strikes were essential to knock out the Cuban air force and protect the disembarkation.

The earlier invasion plan [which called for a landing at the port of Trinidad] had contained no provisions for advance strikes; but with the Bay of Pigs plan there had come a compromise—a strike against Cuban airfields two days before the landings, to be carried out, in order to meet State's objections, only by exile pilots pretending—as a cover story—to be defectors from Castro's air force. After an interval to permit U-2 overflights and photographic assessment of the damage, a second strike—again by exiles—would follow at dawn on D-day morning. No one supposed that the cover story would hold up for very long. But the planners expected that it would hold at least until the invaders hit the beaches—long enough to mask the second strike. The compromise was not altogether satisfactory—the Joint Chiefs fearing that the limited strikes would alert Castro without destroying his air power, and even the CIA preferring a single mass strike concurrent with the invasion—but in the end it seemed the best solution.

As the troopships made their slow way toward Cuba, eight B-26s took off from Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, in the night. At dawn on Saturday morning, April 15, they zoomed down on three main Cuban airfields.

The CIA had estimated Castro's air strength at about 15 B-26s and 10 Sea Furies; there were also four T-33 jets, but these did not figure significantly in either the CIA's calculations or, what is worse, the Joint Chiefs'. Castro's air force, according to the CIA estimate, was "entirely disorganized," its combat efficiency "almost nonexistent."

The pilots returned to Nicaragua with optimistic claims of widespread damage. The overflights the next day, however, showed only five aircraft definitely destroyed. And not all the attacking planes made it back to the base. One developed engine trouble, and its pilot headed on to Florida, finally managing to make an emergency landing in Key West. In the meantime, a ninth exile B-26 had flown straight from Nicaragua to Miami to put the cover plan into operation. The pilot on landing at Miami announced himself as a Castro defector who had just bombed the airfields in Cuba. The unscheduled arrival of the crippled second plane at Key West complicated matters; and the appearance at Jacksonville the day before of a perfectly genuine Castro defector in a Cuban plane compounded the confusion.

The CIA cover story quickly collapsed; Adlai Stevenson, who in good faith had relayed the story to the U.N., was embarrassed; and, as Mr. Schlesinger explains on page 70, the second air strike, which was planned to take place simultaneously with the landings Monday morning, was called off.

The President took charge [at a White House conference early in the morning of Wednesday, April 19]. He was objective and trenchant in his decisions; but the absence of information from the beachhead made decision very difficult. Dick Bissell and Arleigh Burke were proposing a concealed U.S. air strike by planes from the carrier *Essex* lying off Cuba. This, they said, could knock out Castro's T-33 jets and free the Cuban Brigade's B-26s to deal with Castro's tanks. The White House group discussed this proposal in a desultory and rather distracted way; it seemed to be a renewal of a debate which had begun before I arrived.

Finally the President hit upon a compromise. He decided to authorize a flight of six unmarked jets from the *Essex* over the invasion area for the hour after dawn on Wednesday. Their mission would be to cover a new B-26 attack from Nicaragua. They were not to seek air combat or ground targets, but could defend the brigade's planes from air attack.

It seemed a somewhat disingenuous instruction, since it meant that the Castro planes would either have to ignore the B-26s or invite return fire from the jet convoy. The President probably permitted this single relaxation of his ban against the U.S. armed force in the hope that it might make possible the evacuation of the brigade from the beachhead.

In Nicaragua the exile pilots were runs over the beachhead. A few now declined to go out on what seemed a suicide mission. However, some American pilots, under contract to the CIA, agreed to fly sorties. Both the B-26s and the Navy jets started out later that night, but through one more mix-up in this doomed adventure—this one as elementary as a mix-up between the Nicaraguan and Cuban time zones—the B-26s arrived over the beachhead an hour ahead of their jet support. Without cover, the B-26s ran into sharp enemy fire, and four Americans were killed.

Subsequent controversy has settled on the cancellation of the second air strike as the turning point. Mythologists have even talked about a supposed presidential decision to "withdraw U.S. air cover," although there was never any plan for U.S. air cover, and no air cover for the landing force was withdrawn. In retrospect, there clearly was excessive apprehension; the first strike already having taken place, it is hard to see why a second would have made things so much worse at the U.N., or elsewhere.

Kennedy came later to feel that the cancellation of the second strike was an error. But he did not regard it as a decisive error, for, even on the most unlikely assumption that the second strike achieved total success and wiped out Castro's air force, it would still have left 1,200 men against 200,000. The brigade's air power was already in decline because of the scarcity of pilots; and, once the mass arrests [of Cuban civilians] had taken place, there was no hope of uprisings behind the lines.

The second strike might have protracted the stand on the beachhead from three days to 10; it might have permitted the establishment of a provisional government; it might have made possible the eventual evacuation of the attacking force. But there is certainly nothing to suggest that the second air strike could possibly have led to the overthrow of the Castro regime on the terms which President Kennedy laid down from the start—that is, without U.S. intervention.